

## What About the Millennium?

By Brad Allison on 9/5/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 20:1-10*

The passage before us this morning has produced a great deal of discussion, because the decisions you make about its meaning determine which of the three major positions you take on the Bible's view of the future. All three positions take a different view about the timing of the 1,000-year period that is mentioned six times in these verses. This 1,000-year era is commonly called the millennium, and the three positions about it are called Premillennialism, Amillennialism and Postmillennialism. Some have added a fourth position they call Panmillennialism, saying that they believe everything is going to pan out in the end.

We need to begin with a quick summary of the three positions. All three concern the timing of the millennium. Premillennialism believes that the verses in Revelation 20 describe a time that comes after the Second Coming of Jesus. It is called Premillennialism because proponents of this view believe that the Second Coming of Christ comes *before* the millennium. By contrast, Postmillennialists believe that the Second Coming of Jesus occurs after the millennium. They would see these verses before us today as describing a golden age in the current period when the gospel will triumph universally. They don't believe that every person will become a Christian, or that evil will be completely defeated, but that the gospel will be so widely embraced that nations and cultures will be significantly transformed. Amillennialism is an unfortunate name, because the prefix would lead you to believe that these people don't believe in the millennium. That is certainly not the case, because anyone who believes Revelation 20 must believe in a millennium. So Amillennialists prefer a phrase like *Realized* Millennialism. This view says that we are currently in the millennium, but it should not be seen as a literal 1,000 years. Rather, this number is like most of the numbers in the book of Revelation, it is meant to be taken figuratively. It is like the psalmist, who says that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). We all understand that he doesn't mean that the cattle on hill number 1,001 doesn't belong to God. It's meant to be taken figuratively rather than literally. In this case, it represents just a long period of time. So the Amillennialist interprets the words of our passage as applying to the entire period of time between the first and second comings of Christ. (For further information on this topic, I recommend *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse, IVP, 1977)

In the interests of full disclosure, I need to tell you right up front that I am persuaded of the truth of Amillennialism. I believe it best fits both this passage and the rest of the Bible. My biggest problem with Premillennialism is that it requires a Second Coming of Jesus in two stages, one before the millennium and another after it. I see no warrant anywhere in Scripture for such a two-stage view of Jesus' return. I have problems with Postmillennialism because I don't think it deals adequately with the last part of our passage this morning, where we read that Satan will be loosed at the end of the millennium and deceive many.

Having declared my own position, I need to say just a couple more things about these three positions. First, all three of these positions have more in common than they do in opposition to one another. All three believe in a literal Second Coming of Jesus, to be followed by the Great Judgment and the eternal reign of Jesus. So this is an "in-house" dispute between Christians who all love Jesus and believe his Bible. None of these positions could properly be regarded as heretical. Second, I want to say that whatever position we take needs to be held in humility. Remember that almost everyone missed some Old Testament teaching regarding the coming of Jesus, including such basics as the fact that the Messiah would come twice.

So as we look at this passage in Revelation 20, my position is that it describes this entire

age between Jesus' first coming 2000 years ago and his Second Coming that is still future. As we're going to see in the next few minutes, one of the results of an Amillennial approach to Revelation 20 is a strong, but realistic optimism about the future. I believe that a proper understanding of this passage will do a great deal to deliver us from a dangerous pessimism that strikes so many. There are too many Christians who believe Murphy's law, that if something can go wrong, it will. Some Christians even believe that Murphy was an optimist. They see the light at the end of the tunnel as the headlight of an oncoming train. The truth is that we have every reason for optimism. I want us to look at that this morning by looking at three facts about the millennium that we see in this passage. Remember that these verses describe events that are happening in this current age.

## I. Satan Is Bound - vs. 1-3

During the millennium, Satan is bound in a bottomless pit, secured there by a giant chain. The mouth of the pit has been secured and sealed so that he can't escape it. The obvious question is that if this describes the current situation, then how do we understand Scriptures like 1 Peter 5:8 - "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." There are many other Scriptures that speak similarly about Satan's current activity in this age. But it must be said, too, that there are other passages like Hebrews 2:14 which says that through his death, Jesus will "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil." And Colossians 2:15 expands it even further to all demonic powers. "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them." All this is said to have happened through the death of Christ. How do we understand these conflicting verses? I think our passage this morning helps greatly in this. It clearly teaches that Satan is bound, but I think it limits his binding to one particular aspect of his work. It says that he is bound "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended" (v. 3).

So what these first three verses mean is not that Satan is totally inactive in this period of time, but that he will not be allowed to deceive the nations any longer. It lies within his power to so veil the good news of Jesus that no one would believe in him. But he will not be allowed to do so in this age. The result is that the gospel of Jesus will triumph over the nations. There are some interesting figures on the progress of the gospel that have been compiled by the U.S. Center for World Missions. They say that in 100 AD only 1 in every 360 people was an active believer in Christ. By the year 2000, that ratio had dropped to one out of 9.3, despite a growth in world population from 180 million in 100 A.D. to over 6 billion in 2000.

There is an important application that stems from this idea of Satan being bound. We can be bold in our gospel witness. The dragon has been bound with a chain he cannot break. There used to be a dog in the house up the street from ours who would terrorize children walking on the street in front of his house. He would come out barking and growling at them and chase them down the street. Some altered their routes and schedules so as to avoid his aggressive moves. But suppose the owner one day realizes what's happening and decides he needs to chain his dog. He makes the chain short enough that the dog can only patrol about a ten foot radius. Now anyone can walk down the street, and even into the dog's yard, and as long as he is chained he can do nothing beyond bark and growl. In Mark 3:27, Jesus said "no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house." The good news of Revelation 20 is that the strong man has been bound. Now let the plundering begin. Many have been kept in bondage there by his deceptive lies. Let's boldly walk in and set them free.

Illustration: The late Jack Miller was famous for his bold faith in this word that Satan had

been bound. After a time of studying the promises of God, he became convicted that he needed to share the gospel in some of the most difficult places. So he started going to a local fast food drive-in where he found a gang of teenagers Jack classified as the wildest he had ever met. He just walked right in and asked if anyone wanted to talk about the Lord. After three months of that, the wildest among them, and the leader of the group, came to accept the gospel. His name was Bob Heppe, and he gave up his dependence on alcohol and drugs, finished high school and then went to Temple University, where he graduated with high honors. He then married one of Jack's daughters and now serves as a missionary in London, where he worked alongside a former member of this church, Bill Nikides. Satan has been bound, so let the plundering of his house continue as the gospel is preached far and wide.

## II. Jesus Is Reigning – vs. 4-6

Beginning in verse 4, the scene shifts to heaven, where we read that there are thrones. Those sitting on the thrones had authority to judge. Notice who these are. They consist of two groups. First are the martyrs of the faith, those “who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus” (v. 4). The second group is those who had not worshiped the beast or received his mark on their heads or hands. This is a common way in this book of referring to Christians in general. So the ones described here are Christians who have died, whether from martyrdom or from other causes. They are said to be reigning with Christ.

Now comes the difficult part of this passage. What does it mean when it says of these that “they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (v. 4)? There are two options. Either it means a bodily resurrection or simply that their souls are alive rather than in some condition of soul sleep. A clue as to which of these positions we ought to take is indicated by calling this the first resurrection. To specify something as a first implies at least a second, which suggests to me that this is not a bodily resurrection because there is no more resurrection after the bodily. Then the rest of the dead refers to non-Christians and is something of a parenthetical statement, which is indicated by the translation of the NIV.

So here's what this means. For those of our loved ones who have died as believers in Christ, they are currently reigning with him in heaven. They are very much alive right now, and in some way are assisting Christ in the rule of the universe. Perhaps you thought the president of the United States was the most powerful position in the world. It's not. Jesus is reigning, and all who have died in Christ are currently reigning with him.

There is a sweet irony to this, especially for those who have been martyred for the faith. In their martyrdom, it seems that they have little power. Someone else, undoubtedly energized by Satan himself, has exercised ultimate power over them and taken their lives. But in doing so, they have been promoted from one with little power to reigning beside the one with all authority.

## III. Ultimate Victory Is Certain – vs. 7-10

The last few verses of our text tell us that Satan will be released from his pit at the conclusion of this current era. Just prior to Jesus' return, Satan will once more be able to deceive the nations, with the result that forces will be amassed against the church. Missions work will no longer be effective. The church will appear to be under siege. And then, just when defeat looks certain, Jesus will send fire from heaven and defeat Satan and all his forces finally and conclusively, after which comes the final judgment.

In order to grasp the significance of this point, we need to back up and look at it in light of the passage as a whole. We have said that a proper understanding of the passage gives us reason for great optimism. Satan has been bound so that he can no longer deceive the nations. We can now plunder his house, and since he is chained, he can't prevent it. But I can imagine someone saying, "But isn't this optimism a bit naïve? After all, lots of bad things continue to happen to Christians." Well, let's look at that. What are the bad things that can happen? One bad thing is that you could die. But remember that we've just seen that if someone dies as a believer, they immediately begin to reign with Christ. A bad thing is immediately turned into one of the greatest things imaginable. Or there's another possibility. Things could get bad but stop short of death. In such cases Jesus comes, though he often waits until things seem darkest before doing so. He sometimes waits until defeat seems certain before delivering. Our optimism is a realistic optimism, not a naïve optimism. Bad things do happen, including death. But still we cannot lose, even in the worst situations. We have every reason to be an optimistic as we undertake to plunder Satan's house by bringing the gospel to everyone.

### CONCLUSION:

Let's close with two applications. God must see the deception brought by Satan as a major issue. It is the one thing that he makes sure he disallows in this age when the gospel is going forth. It is the gospel that clears away all his deceptions. Have you been deceived by the evil one? He would have you believe that God is something of a cosmic policeman, waiting to catch you in the speed trap of the law so he can pounce on you. I heard a television reporter say yesterday that Florida must have done something wrong because of being hit with this one-two punch from hurricanes Charlie and Frances. But that's a lie. The gospel declares to us that God was ready to punish his own Son in our place in order to secure our freedom from the penalty of the law. He is not waiting to pounce; he's waiting to bless as we simply turn to him and ask him in Jesus' name to bless us. But then there are others who view God as a grandfather type who can't help but love people. The policeman view of God minimizes his love, while the grandfather view of God minimizes his holiness. The result is a religion that doesn't need Jesus. Stop being deceived and believe that God is for you because Jesus obeyed in your place to secure God's blessing and died in your place to satisfy the holiness of God.

The second application is to repent of your pessimism. On board a ship sailing the Indian Ocean, Ludwig and Rosine Krapf landed on the Kenyan coast in May 1844. Rosine was well along in her pregnancy. Yet the young couple's excitement over soon having their first child could not eclipse their zeal to establish a beachhead for the gospel in East Africa. So they set up camp full of hope and optimism, anticipating how the Lord might use them. Two months later Rosine gave birth to a baby girl. But there was little time to celebrate, as malaria soon struck each member in the small family of three. Still weak from giving birth, Rosine died without much of a fight. The baby lasted only a few days longer. Ludwig was so afflicted by fever that he barely made it to the burials. In the midst of his grief, the valiant widower wrote his mission board with the tragic news and sought to explain its importance. "Tell our friends at home that there is now on the East African coast a lonely missionary grave. This is a sign that you have commenced the struggle... As the victories of the Church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members, you may be more convinced that the hour is at hand when you are summoned to the conversion of Africa from its eastern shore." Ours is a realistic optimism. Troubles will occur and some may lose their lives. But even in that, nothing has been lost and everything has been gained. We will reign with Christ. So let the plundering of Satan's house continue as we rescue souls from the deceptions of Satan and into the glorious freedom of the gospel.